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An Intersection of Innovation

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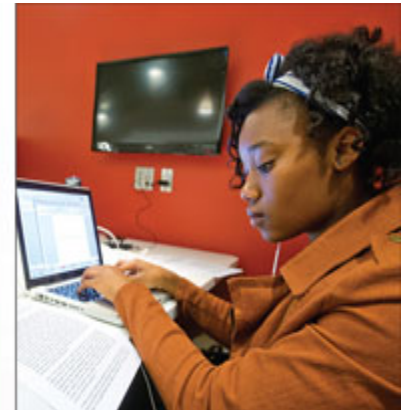


Through technology and innovative use of classroom space, State Farm Hall inspires new ways to teach and learn.

Story by CANDACE SCHILLING
& TIM OBERMILLER

Pick any classroom in State Farm Hall, and you will likely find examples of collaborative learning in action.

Start with Room 1, a curriculum lab where future teachers are exploring how to integrate technology into their classrooms. “Technology can be a tool for engaging students, but it can also be a tool that fails depending on the content being taught and the purpose of the lesson,” says Jeanne Koehler, assistant professor of Educational Studies.



State Farm Hall was designed around the concept of collaboration — between student and professor and among the students themselves.

“We want students to experiment, try applications, develop interactive whiteboard activities and make decisions about how and when technology enhances teaching and when and why it detracts from the learning experience.”

With 47,800 square feet of space on four levels, State Farm Hall accommodates the latest trends in learning technology. But its planners took care to ensure that high-tech was a servant, not master, in guiding the building’s diverse educational ventures.

A committee of faculty, staff and students determined early on in the building's planning that "we need instructional technology that is not obtrusive," says Frank Boyd, IWU associate provost, dean of faculty and project manager for the new classroom facility. "Technology is useful when it is a catalyst for learning, not just an artifice or addition."

Boyd points out that the most powerful learning technique in the new State Farm Hall — sharing ideas — is neither new nor high-tech. But advanced technology does fuel this pedagogic practice of collaboration. When students can complete coursework in advance, post it in an online class forum and project it on a screen for the entire class to see, discussion is enriched. And when an instructor can capture notes ordinarily erased from a standard whiteboard and email those notes to class members, students are free to focus on and participate in that discussion rather than capturing every item their classmate or instructor writes.

In learning about new technologies and what might work best in State Farm Hall classrooms, IWU professors are relying on a form of "contagious experimentation," says Boyd. He calls it "an organic way to disseminate innovative pedagogies among the faculty. There is an evangelical dimension to this. Someone sees something a professor is trying in her classroom and asks, 'What is she doing? Okay, I'll try doing that.'"

Prior to the building's opening, "some colleagues had a hard time visualizing this level of technology as an enhancement, instead of a 'nice-to-have,'" says Boyd. He recalls a senior faculty member who, prior to State Farm Hall's opening, confessed, "I'm not into a lot of this new technology." Just two weeks later, Boyd heard the same professor request to be in a classroom with even more technology options, after "thinking of new ways to engage students."

Smoothing the transition

In general, the transition for faculty has been "smoother than we ever dreamed," says Boyd. He cites several reasons, including prototypes set up in Shaw Hall that let instructors get a feel for State Farm Hall's technology and classroom-layout options prior to its opening. Boyd also credits an on-site team of IWU technology staff — including Patrick McLane, Ray Martinez and Michael Limacher — who offered workshops and helped guide faculty through the first semester of the building's use.



Those same experts were available to help students. Not surprisingly, most were already familiar with the technology. "Students have been working in these enhanced learning environments since the second grade," notes McLane.

That's doesn't mean students aren't impressed with the new classroom building — especially upper-level students who, in past years, took numerous classes in Shaw Hall.

By integrating technology into classrooms, State Farm Hall helps prepare students for a world where such tools are now essential for exploration and research, according to Onyinye Udenze '13. "The technology has helped me prepare for the real world by familiarizing me with multimedia presentations, including news reports, videos and audio," says Udenze, an economics major who graduated in December.

Another feature "allows students to broadcast their laptop screens on the screens in class to facilitate class discussions and student engagement," Udenze adds. With the multiple screens, "it's also easy to follow class presentations, irrespective of where the student is sitting."

Alexandra Bechtel, a senior business/economics double major, recalls her frustration "when my professor has drawn a graph or a chart on the whiteboard and when I look at my notes, my attempt to replicate it looks nothing like what the professor had drawn." The use of interactive whiteboards, called Eno boards, allows professors to draw out examples that they can later post as screen shots on the course's online page. "This small change saves time during class," says Betchel, "and helps me to learn the material even better."

Betchel also benefited from State Farm Hall's new technologies when working one-on-one with Associate Economics Professor Diego Mendez-Carbajo for her senior seminar project. Using a portable Huddleboard, Betchel projected images from her laptop "so that we both see the information without cramming around a small laptop or using paper flipcharts. Since we were working for about two hours one day, this improved the quality of work we were able to accomplish significantly."

Such technology also eliminates the fiscal and environmental costs associated with "physically reproducing visual aids such as paper handouts and transparencies," says Boyd.



A formal inaugural ceremony was held this fall that included State Farm Chairman and CEO Ed Rust Jr. '72 (above right). The State Farm Foundation gave a \$10 million gift toward the building's construction, part of the University's ongoing Transforming Lives campaign

Room to grow

Some of State Farm Hall's most admired features have nothing to do with technology, but are a direct result of feedback from students involved in brainstorming about what to include in the building's design. A frequent complaint about Shaw Hall was that there was no place for students to study and interact before or after class. Such concerns led to the inclusion of tall, padded café-style booths and tables near the State Farm hall lobby, where students can sit in small groups and discuss course material projected onto small flat screens mounted on the walls.

"One of the main things I like about State Farm Hall," says Udenze, "is that there are a lot of cozy places to study," including eight small study-group rooms.

“I also really appreciate the fact that the tables are a lot bigger than the little desks in Shaw Hall, and I can actually have my textbook and notes on the table,” says Udenze. On average, State Farm Hall’s classrooms offer about 30 square feet per student, nearly double Shaw Hall’s per-student classroom size.



Student input led to inclusion of places to study and meet before and after class, including cafe-style booths and tables near the lobby.

State Farm Hall’s 19 classrooms, seminar room and auditorium-style case study room provide multiple options that allow faculty to match class layouts to their specific courses and styles of professor–student interactions. Much of the furniture in the building is wheeled, making it easy to reconfigure a classroom before or even during a class for breakout discussions. Wheeled podiums can be moved front-and-center during a lecture or to one side during a student presentation or group discussion.

“The ideal classroom meets the needs of all 12 instructors who use it,” says McLane.

The balance of collaboration, flexibility and innovation that has gone into creating and using State Farm Hall reflects IWU’s longstanding values, according to Boyd. “State Farm Hall is the newest example of what we already do all over our campus,” he says.

“IWU views teaching as an intellectual enterprise — not just feeding knowledge to students. We’re reflective about our pedagogy, our teaching practice. At State Farm Hall you have a perfect setting for that creativity.”

Educational Studies faculty member Koehler appreciates that Illinois Wesleyan has taken the long view on how technology can be adapted to fit the particular needs of professors and their students. She tells her own Educational Studies students that many questions on how best to integrate technology and teaching are still unresolved and invites them to join in the process of discovering their own answers.

“I think it is exciting that Illinois Wesleyan views this new technology as an opportunity to allow professors to explore how this will work in our own classrooms and beyond.”